



Photo by LCdr. Tom Hamrick

No Kiddin'; There I Was, I Thought I Was Gonna Die!

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You usually see these words at the beginning of an *Approach* article when some hot-shot pilot saves his plane, his crew, and a few million bucks for the Navy. I wish that's what this story is about: landing a burning, single-engine F-14 on the pitching deck of a carrier in a thunderstorm at night. Alas, it isn't. But it does involve a common concept in aviation safety, the chain of events leading to a mishap. If you break one of those links, you can avoid disaster. Unfortunately, for a couple of JO buds and myself, we didn't.

It all began on a weeklong carrier-qualifications period on the "Big E." Being stereotypical aviators, we required large amounts of caffeine, and being VF-14 Tophatters, we were used to an overly plush and ritzy lifestyle. Therefore, the thought of drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups for a week didn't appeal to us. We packed up 30 mugs and a huge pegboard. That was the first link.

When we returned from our grueling week on the carrier, one of the first orders of business was to

return the coffee mugs and pegboard to our squadron. One of our junior officers (showing great initiative) single-handedly set the pegboard where it belonged, on the coffee-mess counter against the wall. The pegboard looked like it was mounted properly, but it wasn't. Not having any screws or tools to secure it, he headed for the first lieutenant's locker to retrieve what he needed. This was link No. 2.

While one of our officers was searching for tools, another one walked into the mess. Seeing the empty board, he, too, showed great initiative by hanging the mugs in their rightful places (link No. 3).

Just as he was hanging the last mug, I walked into the mess to get a cup of hot coffee. As I took my cup off the board, I upset the fine balance of glass and wood (the final link in the chain of destruction). It all came down on me. I threw myself forward, in a desperate attempt to save as many mugs as possible. (Could I get a medal for this?) I did save the skipper's. But sadly, 10 of those mugs were lost forever—the XO's was among them. (My hopes for a medal were dashed.)

My squadronmates are taking steps to see that a mishap like this doesn't happen again. The first officer will never lean a board against the wall and leave it while he gets tools. The second one will check to see if the board is attached to the wall before he hangs mugs on it. As for me, I'm drinking from Styrofoam. 